Gardening by Roy Hay

Enjoy these gardens—and help charity

This has been a wonderful spring to visit gardens open to the public. Camellias and rhododendrons budded up well last year, and in most parts of the country the birds were kinder than usual during the winter to flowering cherries, and they have been really magnificent. The unkind frosts in early May destroyed the open flowers of rhododendrons but most of the buds escaped, and with luck there should be plenty to see in the next week or two. Happily, every year more and more people go visiting gardens open on behalf of various charities, and their contributions are gratefully received.

To know which gardens are open in any particular area, one should have the booklet *Gardens of England and Wales,* issued by the National Gardens Scheme at 2s. 6d. or 3s. 1d. including postage, obtainable from The Organizing Secretary, The National Gardens Scheme, 57 Lower Belgrave Street, London, S.W.1.; also *Gardens to Visit*, price 1s., or 1s. 4d. including postage, from The Organizer, Gardeners' Sunday, White Witches, Claygate Road, Dorking, Surrey.

This last-named organization, which has been established for 11 years, raises money for the two gardening charities, The Gardeners' Royal Benevolent Society and The Royal Gardeners' Orphan Fund. It is interesting to note that this year a garden in America—the Rip Van Winkle Gardens, Jefferson Island, Louisiana—was opened on March 26 for the benefit of these two gardeners' charities.

Other lists of gardens open include *Scotland's Gardens*, price 2s. 6d. (2s. 11d. including postage) from the General Organizer, 26 Castle Terrace, Edinburgh; *The National Trust Gardens*, from The National Trust, 42 Queen Anne's Gate, London, S.W.1, price 3s. 6d. including postage, and *Historic Houses, Castles, and Gardens in Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, from Index Publishers, Ltd., 69 Victoria Street, London, S.W.1, price 5s. (6s. including postage).

My own garden will be open on behalf of the two gardeners' charities, for the Gardeners' Sunday Fund, on the last Sunday in June, from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. All readers will be made very welcome, and a number of knowledgeable horticultural friends will be around to explain and advise on your problems.

Every spring, I receive several letters from readers who complain that their naturalized bulbs are dwindling away. On inquiry, I usually find that the bulbs are growing either under trees or on light, quick-draining soils, and therefore are being deprived of water at the crucial point in their development—between the time the flowers fade and the foliage begins to wither.

This has been a particularly exasperating spring so far, with alternate periods of wet and drought, and I can only repeat the advice I have given often, to see that all bulbs, especially those under trees with a heavy canopy of foliage, receive copious supplies of water between now and the end of June. The only exception would be tulips—the species and varieties which very often naturalize and increase. They do not need this water, but prefer a hot baking.

I.C.I.'s Plant Protection Division recently received a Queen's Award for its export activities, largely because of its success with their weedkiller paraquat. Experiences with the granular form, especially made for amateur use, and sold under the name of Weedol, have proved remarkably satisfactory.

I use paraquat very considerably, and find it invaluable for keeping down weeds on paths, among crazy paving, under hedge bottoms, among fruit bushes and elsewhere. But I find that old gardening habits die hard. Once weeds have been killed, as some will be perhaps within 36 hours in hot weather, they look rather unsightly.

They will, of course, disintegrate in the course of time, but many of us are seized with the itch to grab a hoe and chop them off. This, naturally, defeats the object, because hoeing disturbs the soil's surface and brings more weed seeds up to germinate.

It is not generally realized that practically all weed seeds germinate in the top quarter of an inch of soil. There is no need to hoe the soil surface after the weeds die.

We used to hear a great deal about soil aeration—the exchange of oxygen, carbon dioxide, and so on, but much research work has shown that there is no need to keep that fine tilth on the soil—many crops perform better if the soil is left undisturbed. But, for the look of the thing, I am afraid many of us still go on hoeing. What baffles me is that it is almost impossible to persuade gardeners to hoe when the weeds are very tiny. They put off the evil day until the weeds are quite massive, and then there is all the weary business of raking them up, and ferrying them to the compost heap.

If weeds are treated either by hoeing or by watering with paraquat when they are very small, they do not look unsightly and soon disintegrate and disappear.

With new materials one must learn new techniques. This is particularly true of the peat potting compost — Levington compost — which can be used in one form for seed sowing, in another for potting plants. We were always taught to firm plants well when potting, but this can be fatal when using these peat composts impregnated with fertilizers. If the peat compost is firmed, there is a danger of overwatering.

But, as we found after many experiments, provided the compost is not firmed with the fingers, it is practically impossible to overwater. Just put the plant in a pot, fill it up with the compost, and give it a watering to settle the compost in the pot.

The usual spring spate of gardening books is coming in, and I have been particularly intrigued with *Easy Plants for Difficult Places*, by Geoffrey Smith (Collingridge, 35s.). Geoffrey Smith is Superintendent of the Northern Horticultural Society's Gardens at Harlow Car, near Harrogate.

There he has really had difficult conditions because the soil is not very friendly, and the garden is exposed to powerful easterly and westerly winds. The problem has been to plant wind breaks, and I note with pleasure that he puts the beech at the head of his list for a hedge. He also puts privet fairly high on the list, and as he says, it would not be so common in town and country if it were not such an easygoing and useful hedge plant.

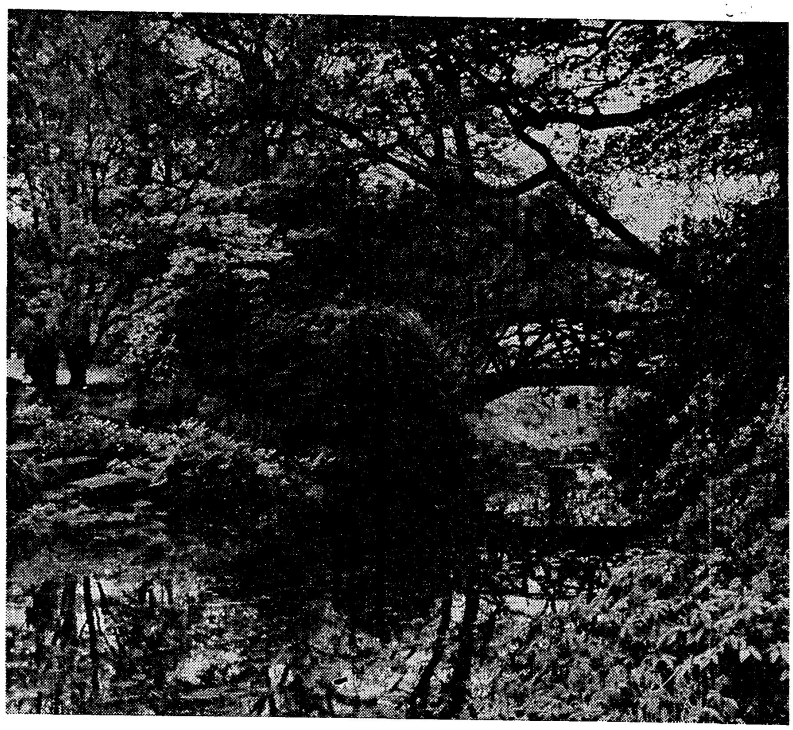
I agree entirely with him about *Lonicera nitida* and holly—he is against both as a hedge. On my light, quick-draining soil I find that *Cupressocyparis leylandii* grows very fast—on better soil it will no doubt grow even faster. Mr. Smith does not mention the prunus hedges which, of course, grow very rapidly indeed, but I see no reason why they should not grow in an exposed site just as well as anywhere else.

After all, my own garden at 600 feet above sea level, with nothing to break the south-west gales which sweep across from Hindhead is not ideal to establish hedges, but we have had prunus hedges up to six feet in three years.

His list of herbaceous plants is very revealing—as one would expect, eryngiums, hemerocallis, geraniums, aconites, hostas, irises, *Phlomis samia*, and phloxes he recommends enthusiastically.

He also enthuses about astilbes for those who can provide a soil moist even in drought periods. I well remember my surprise when being shown round Munich's Botanic Garden several years ago by Wilhelm Schacht, at an enormous planting of astilbes under the shade of huge trees. I asked him how he did it, and he just shrugged and said—"We water".

May I once again commend real plant lovers to install in even a few parts of the garden some permanent sprinklers which can be turned on at will, because one can grow so many more beautiful plants if they can be watered when necessary.



This delightful nook is in Barrogill, Wimbledon Common, which opens to the public tomorrow.

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